Forum on the Public’s Role in Planning for Growth and Development

On Tuesday evening, April 20, a forum on the public’s role in planning for growth and development was held at Stetson University. Approximately 120 citizens from around Volusia County attended to discuss different approaches to the issue.

The evening kicked off with a keynote address by the Frank Bruno, chair of the Volusia County Council. Most of the evening was devoted to deliberation among the participants who were seated in 8 groups, each facilitated by a moderator. The participants looked at four distinctly different but commonly held approaches to defining the public’s role before developing responses of their own.

The summit was sponsored by the Political Science department at Stetson University, with support from the University’s Community-Based Research program. The event was organized and led by political scientist Dr. William J. Ball and the students enrolled in his Civic Engagement course.

“We had a very diverse group here tonight. People came from all over the region and ranged in age from 19 to senior citizens,” notes Dr. Ball, “There was a great mix of community residents, students and academics, business people, community activists, local government officials, and professional planners.”

Although the largest number of participants who identified their home communities were from the DeLand area (49), the rest represented a large number of communities in the central Florida region, including 13 from Daytona Beach, 6 from DeBary, 5 from Deltona, 4 each from New Smyrna Beach and Ormond Beach, 3 each from Orange City and Port Orange, 2 from Lake Helen, and 1 each from Bradenton, Edgewater, Flagler Beach, Lake Mary, Orlando, and St. Petersburg.

As they arrived, participants in the summit were surveyed on their backgrounds and the view on the public’s role. There was quite a range of familiarity with the topic. When asking to respond to the prompt “I consider myself to be knowledgeable about the issues to be discussed at this forum,” 29% indicated that they strongly agree, 43% agree, 22% neither agree nor disagree, 4% disagree, and 1% strongly disagree.

One of the most discussed topics at the forum was Amendment 4 (Hometown Democracy) which will be on the fall Florida ballot. Although there is no reason to believe that the group attending the forum was representative of the voting public, they were surveyed on their view on the amendment in order to assess the diversity of opinions in the room. The results of the survey question were:

“If the fall election was being held today, how would you vote on Florida Amendment 4 (Hometown Democracy)?”

11% I don’t know what the amendment is
7% I know what the amendment is, but I don’t know how I would vote
41% I would vote for the amendment
41 % I would vote against the amendment

--continued on reverse--
After discussing the initial approaches, participants worked in their groups to develop specific responses on which a majority in each group could agree. The most common responses developed include:

- Question the sustainability of growth. Can we balance private property rights with the public good?
- Create an educated public that can understand the issues and that understands the public’s duties and responsibilities to guide growth and development decisions.
- Offer civic education from grades K-12, and adult education through Citizens Academies.
- Reinforce the responsibility of engaged citizens to engage others.
- Inspire, educate, and encourage the public to think in long-range terms, grounded in community norms and values.
- Create a new, ongoing process for citizens and government to work together. Address the significant level of public distrust of elected officials. Ordinary citizens need to have an equal voice and standing in public meetings including rebuttal time, relative to experts, lawyers, and politicians.
- Extend government outreach by encouraging agencies to expand their notification radius to inform, educate, and consult with citizens. Facilitate local and neighborhood organization and meetings on the issues (e.g., homeowner associations, community meetings).
- Cultivate fair, unbiased, and competent media contributions to communication and education on sustainable growth issues.

During the final phase of the program each participant provided individual comments on the issue.

“Our goal tonight was to bring together citizens of different views to have a direct discussion with each other as a means to finding the common ground among them.” Dr. Ball commented, “The statements they drafted represent the beginning of a process of finding common ground without glossing over the differences among deeply held values. We look forward to staying in touch with people who wish to continue to work in this spirit and to facilitate their civic engagement.”